Geoduck Aquaculture Feasibility Project

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Geoduck are the largest burrowing clam in the world and also the most long-lived.

The oldest geoduck ever found was 168 years old.

They are most abundant in the subtidal and intertidal waters of Washington State.

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Legislature Funds Geoduck Pilot Project

The 2003 Legislature directed the state Department of Natural Resources (DNR) to develop a **Pilot Project** proposal to determine the feasibility of geoduck aquaculture on tidelands and submerged lands DNR manages in Puget Sound as a public trust. DNR will work with the University of Washington School of Aquatic & Fishery Sciences to design and conduct this Pilot Project.

Geoduck aquaculture was experimented with in the early 1990's in Washington. Young geoduck were grown at a state-operated hatchery and planted on the seabed. When it was determined that survival of young geoduck was very low, enhancement efforts were stopped. Recent private sector intertidal aquaculture efforts in Washington and subtidal efforts in Canada suggest it's time for another look at the potential of geoduck aquaculture in Washington.

Meetings Begin

The Department of Natural Resources will be holding meetings around the Puget Sound with groups interested in the issue of geoduck aquaculture. These groups include shellfish growers, shellfish harvesters, upland property owners, local governments, tribes, and geoduck purchasers & wholesalers. The purpose of these meetings will be to help figure out what issues need to be addressed during the Pilot Project and to hear from these groups about the possible impacts of leasing state-owned aquatic lands for geoduck aquaculture. We met with the shellfish growers on October 28, 2003, and the shellfish harvesters on November 6, 2003. Meetings will be held with upland property owners and local governments from December 2003 through February 2004. The Northwest Indian Fisheries Commission will be facilitating meetings with tribes. In addition, we continue to hold meetings with the other managers of the geoduck resource—the Department of Fish and Wildlife and 18 Puget Sound Indian Treaty Tribes.

What We've Been Hearing

We'll be using this section of our newsletter to report on what we've been hearing from geoduck stakeholders during our meetings with them. Our first meeting was with the board of the **Pacific Coast Shellfish Growers Association**. What we heard from them was their frustration at the length of time we were proposing for the first phase of the pilot project (Nov.'03 to Sept.'04). The growers particularly wanted to see an in-the-ground project begun by early 2004. The second meeting we held was with the board of the **Geoduck Harvesters Association**. They were satisfied with the schedule for phase I, but also wanted to see an in-the-ground project begun earlier. They particularly wanted to see subtidal aquatic lands used for an early project. Both groups were interested in partnerships to achieve results with an in-the-ground project. On November 14, 2003, the **Senate Natural Resources, Energy, and Water Committee** (chaired by Senator Bob Morton) held a hearing on geoduck aquaculture. Representatives from the Pacific Coast Shellfish Growers Association, the Geoduck Harvesters Association, the Divers Union, DNR, Northwest Indian Fisheries Commission, and Department of Fish & Wildlife addressed the committee. Members of the non-governmental groups expressed the opinion that they felt they'd been heard during this early process and that their concerns would be addressed. Sen. Morton expressed a desire to speed up the timeline of the pilot project.

Geoducks are jointly managed by the Washington Department of Natural Resources, Washington Department of Fish & Wildlife, and 18 Puget Sound Treaty Tribes.

Puget Sound Treaty Tribes have a right to 50% of the harvestable surplus of geoducks. The Department of Natural Resources has proprietary rights over the State's half of the harvest and auctions the right to harvest geoducks to private companies and individuals. The Department of Fish & Wildlife ensures the biological health of the geoduck fishery. All three groups provide enforcement.

Proposal for Pilot Project

The University of Washington School of Aquatic & Fishery Sciences (UW) will design research projects which will evaluate environmental impacts of intertidal and subtidal geoduck cultivation; advance cultivation practices; examine economic feasibility; show long-term sustainability; and address management and enforcement concerns. The UW Project will also develop Best Management Practices for geoduck cultivation, including site criteria and culture methods that minimize impacts to existing fisheries and ecological systems.

Aquaculture Impacts

Potential impacts to native geoduck populations and other species need to be understood to ensure that the benefits of geoduck aquaculture do not cause unintended negative consequences on these species.

Questions relating to disease, competition for food, predator population effects, and impacts on the existing native geoduck fishery need to be answered. The addition of cultured geoduck to the market adds another complexity to the enforcement of harvest and health laws.

The most significant legal question associated with geoduck aquaculture is related to Tribal Treaty Rights. The federal court Rafeedie Decision (U.S. v. Washington) affects 18 tribes located along Puget Sound and the Straits of Juan de Fuca. This decision affirms the tribes' treaty right to take, from natural beds, up to fifty percent of the total allowable catch of any shellfish species (including geoduck) within the usual and accustomed areas for that tribe, and to share in the management of the geoduck resource.